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AUTHOR Klein, Jeanne; Fitch, Marguerite
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ABSTRACT

Two studies investigate the way in which children make sense of a play and the visual, aural, and psychological components of theatre which contribute to this comprehension. In the first study, 32 fifth graders saw "Don Quixote of La Mancha." In the second study, 45 third graders saw "Monkey, Monkey" (about the Chinese Monkey King). The day after play attendance 15-minute interviews were conducted with the children. The children: (1) rated the difficulty in understanding the plays; (2) told what they remembered best and what they learned; (3) sequenced central actions of plots; (4) inferred the plays' main ideas and the protagonists' intentions and emotions; (5) recalled specific dialogue; and (6) reported their preference between theatre and television. The findings indicated that visual cues, primarily dramatic actions, are most easily recalled and assist children in making inferences about main ideas and protagonists' intentions. Moreover, children's attention to dialogue and aural cues further enhances comprehension and ease of understanding plays. In other words, children do listen to plays, as long as the dialogue informs and reinforces visualized dramatic actions throughout the performance. In addition, the findings indicate that the given stimulus determines the nature of how it is processed. (RJC)

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Children's Comprehension of Live Theatre

Jeanne Klein

Department of Theatre and Film

University of Kansas

Marguerite Fitch

Department of Human Development

University of Kansas

A paper presented to the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Kansas City, April 27, 1989.

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Historically, live theatre is a product of our culture's oral storytelling traditions. As such, it has the potential both to entertain and teach children. However, theatre for young audiences remains largely unexamined as a medium for children's entertainment and education. Little is known about children's "dramatic literacy"--that is, how they comprehend plots, main ideas, or intentions of characters, and what, if anything, they learn from plays. Today, children are accustomed to watching television which provides viewers with edited images. Given live performers with no dictated, visual close-ups, as in television, how do children make sense of a play? Which visual, aural, and psychological components of plays contribute most to children's comprehension of live theatre?

Method

Adapting some of the methods employed in television research, two studies were designed to examine children's "dramatic literacy" and the modal sources for their inferences. In the first study, 32 5th graders saw Don Quixote of La Mancha (Klein, 1987). In the second study, 45 3rd graders saw Monkey, Monkey (about the Chinese Monkey King) (Klein and Fitch, 1989). During individual 15-minute interviews conducted the day after play attendance, children: 1) rated the difficulty in understanding the plays;

2) told what they remembered best and what they learned from plays; 3) sequenced central actions of plots from photographs or dialogue; 4) inferred the plays' main ideas and the protagonists' intentions and emotions; 5) recalled specific dialogue; and, 6) reported their preference between theatre and television. Cues for inferences were categorized as visual (e.g., dramatic actions), verbal/aural (e.g., dialogue and inflections), or psychological (e.g., motives and mental states of characters), as adapted from coding methods used in Meringoff's comparative media studies (1980; Vibbert and Meringoff, 1981; Banker and Meringoff, 1982). All correlations reported below are one-tailed and are significant at $p<.05$ or less.

Results

1. Difficulty Rating as a Function of Type of Inference

Most 5th graders rated Don Quixote "hard" to understand, and they used visual cues more than verbal/aural or psychological cues in their inferences. By contrast, most 3rd graders found Monkey "easy," and they used visual, verbal/aural and psychological cues almost equally. In both studies, use of visual cues (primarily dramatic actions) was positively related to use of verbal/aural cues (5th $r = .37$; 3rd $r = .43$) and psychological cues (both $r = .36$). However, the more children used verbal/aural cues, the easier they rated

their understanding of the plays (5th r = -.34; 3rd r = -.43) and the higher their level of general comprehension (both r = .39). The plays were rated as "easy" to understand by 5th graders who used all three types of cues (r = -.35), and by 3rd graders who frequently recalled dialogue and accurately remembered a specific line of dialogue representing the main idea of the play (r = -.36).

2. Best Recall and Plot Sequencing

Similar to findings in television research, children in both studies recalled visualized dramatic actions (i.e., what characters actually did) better than dialogue. Likewise, when sequencing plot actions from either photographs or dialogue, on the average both 3rd and 5th graders turned cards twice as often from dialogue to photographs than the reverse. Starting condition did not adversely affect sequencing scores to a significant degree.

3. Comprehension of Main Idea

Less than one-third of the children in either study (5th 31%; 3rd 25%) spontaneously made metaphoric connections from the plays to their own lives when inferring main ideas. Both groups based inferences for main ideas primarily on what they saw visually (5th 47% & 3rd 43% of all main idea cues), while also drawing psychological implications (5th 31% & 3rd 29% of all

main idea cues). However, modal cues for inferences regarding the protagonists' intentions were skewed on the basis of each respective performance text. Because Don Quixote did not verbalize his intentions directly, 5th graders used more visual cues (60% of all intention cues) to infer what he wanted to do throughout the play. By contrast, Monkey King verbalized his intentions explicitly, and 3rd graders not only used his visual actions (44% of all intention cues), but they also repeated his dialogue as heard (36% of all intention cues).

4. Comprehension of Affect

Having been seated 25 to 50 feet from the stage, neither 3rd nor 5th graders used characters' facial expressions as visual cues for making inferences. Despite this limitation, 3rd graders accurately inferred the emotions of three main characters. Primarily, they used vocal inflections and dialogue to infer the emotions of a puppet and a masked character (Yama 38% & Dragon King 39% of all affect cues for each character). To infer Monkey King's emotion (a character wearing animal makeup), they used all three types of cues nearly equally. Fifth graders were not asked to infer the emotions of specific characters.

5. Aural Recall

All children were tested on aural recall of

explicit dialogue. Most 5th graders could not identify Dulcinea, an offstage character, even though her identity was explicitly described and mentioned 24 times in the text. Almost three-quarters of the 3rd graders were unable to recall a specific line of dialogue reflecting the play's main idea. Moreover, their inferences of the main idea were positively related to their recall of this dialogue and what they reported learning from the play ($r = .48$ and $.33$ respectively). In addition, over half (53%) reported learning the intended concepts of the play regarding bravery and good moral behaviors.

6. Media Preference

Children in both studies reported preferring theatre 3 to 1 over television, primarily for its "more real" live values (5th $r = .44$; 3rd $r = .38$). These children integrated all three types of inference cues to a greater extent than those who preferred television (5th $r = .33$; 3rd $r = .32$). Those who preferred television did so primarily for this medium's greater home comfort and viewer control (5th $r = -.61$; 3rd $r = -.43$).

Discussion

Visual cues, primarily dramatic actions, are most easily recalled and assist children in making inferences about main ideas and protagonists'

intentions. Moreover, children's attention to dialogue and aural cues further enhances comprehension and ease of understanding plays. In other words, children do listen to plays, as long as the dialogue informs and reinforces visualized dramatic actions throughout the performance. However, more studies are needed to identify the critical formal features of theatre's conventions from a developmental perspective. For example, do children believe adult actors who play child protagonists or several roles by the mere switch of a costume? This knowledge can be used by producers of theatre for young audiences to enhance children's comprehension of plays and optimize enjoyment and learning.

The results of these two studies also inform the debate concerning the visual superiority hypothesis in television research. Studies consistently reveal that when given a choice between visual or auditory modes, children prefer to process stories visually, especially at younger ages, and visual presentations can either increase or decrease comprehension levels (e.g., Hayes and Birnbaum, 1980). However, as the present theatre studies demonstrate, the given stimulus determines the nature of how it is processed. Essentially, the central issue is whether or not the visual and auditory modes within a stimulus reinforce, highlight,

contradict or distract from one another in presenting dramatic actions and critical story information (cf. Calvert, et al. 1988). The nature of the comprehension task also determines the modality used in cognitive processing (e.g., Meringoff, et al. cited in Bryant and Anderson, 1983). Story information will be recalled visually or aurally, depending on its initial visual or auditory presentation, and the modality through which it is later retrieved. For example, comprehension abilities are challenged when visual information (e.g., dramatic action) is retrieved visually in the mind's eye, and then translated in verbal or propositional form during an oral interview (cf. Kosslyn, 1980). Still, it may well be that live performers in theatre induce greater attention to spoken dialogue and vocal inflections without the visual distractions of television's camera conventions.

Future studies could compare theatre and television directly, using analogous story versions, to examine key differences in attention, comprehension and recall of dramatic media. Children's idiosyncratic visual attention to characters and events across a stage could be compared against their visual attention to dictated televised images. As such, differences between children's "democratic" search for critical perceptual features in theatre and "dictated"

television-generated images could inform theories of perception. For example, does a speaking character take sufficient focus away from other visual attractions on stage, or do children listen intently to characters while they focus on other visual stimulations around an entire stage environment?

More questions may be posed for future theatre studies or media comparisons. Are plays easier to understand in theatre without the distractions of television's camera cuts, or are they harder to understand because more mental effort must be invested and greater attention must be paid to dialogue given the lack of closeup visual details? Does television induce greater emotional involvement given closeups of characters' faces, or do theatre's live performers increase emotional responses? Are televised dramas easier to understand given dictated visual details, or are they harder to follow because filmic montages must be understood and integrated at a rapid pace?

Just as the Children's Television Workshop developed its programming through the collaborative efforts of artists and psychologists, so might theatre for young audiences be enhanced and innovated through similar collaborations at local levels. Research into the effects of live theatre on children's comprehension

can explore this storytelling experience as an entertaining alternative to television viewing.

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